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### Diversity programs still thrive

Seniority-based cuts can imperil diversity

February 15, 2004

By Charley Hannagan  
Staff writer

Central New York companies say their diversity programs are still going strong despite a struggling economy.

Companies say they haven't abandoned the philosophy because it's become as much a part of their culture as doing business internationally.

"It's really already interwoven in all our daily business. It's part of everything we do every day," said Pam Brunet, speaking for Bristol-Myers Squibb Co. in East Syracuse.

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Companies soon realized that as the demographics of the country changed, diversity wasn't a social experiment so much as a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

If your company isn't willing to hire workers or serve customers of different skin colors, cultures or religions, you might as well close, businesses say.

"We've had to open up and take the blinders away and become diversified; otherwise, I don't think we'd coexist as well," said Silvia Soos-Kazel, a human resources consultant from Onondaga. "It's a global situation."

Many companies, such as Bristol-Myers, go beyond diversity awareness training. They seek diverse suppliers and recruit workers across cultures and ages.

"We continue to expand our programs," said Ellen Mitchell, speaking for Lockheed Martin, a Salina defense contractor.

Lockheed's Salina campus employs 15 Inroads scholars, more than any local employer, she said. Inroads began in 1970 to help businesses develop talented minority college students for professional careers. During their internships, students receive training, coaching, take part in workshops and perform community service.

Lockheed also recruits from engineering societies that cater to women and minorities, she said.

St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center has beefed up its diversity training, said Kerri Ganci, speaking for the hospital.

It has expanded its new employee diversity presentation from about 20 minutes to an hour, she said. In addition, a voluntary management training program called LEAD - leadership, evolution, advancement and development - diversity training.

St. Joseph's makes the same diversity training module available on a voluntary basis to all of its employees several times a year, Ganci said.

Soos-Kazel and other human resource consultants say they suspect the diversity philosophy has become so much a part of doing business that it's ingrained in corporate culture.

"I think all in all we've done a wonderful job of acknowledging and educating," she said. "Probably, like anything else, you can always do more."

Mike Streeter, executive director of the Greater Rochester Diversity Council, said he finds that interest in diversity hasn't waned. The council was formed in 1996 with members from many of Rochester's largest corporations, such as Kodak and Bausch & Lomb. It has grown in the past two years from 25 businesses and nonprofits to 40.

The group has a Web site, [www.rochesterdiversitycouncil.com](http://www.rochesterdiversitycouncil.com), that gets 6,000 visits a month. The group will host a national diversity conference in September.

Saying the word "diversity" means different things to different people, Streeter said. Some people use it exclusively to refer to affirmative action, he said.

"The more accurate way to think about it is it's about creating organizations that naturally attract and retain the best workers," Streeter said. "You want to be the organization of choice, and you work on that for the long haul. It's not a matter of a couple training programs and we're done. Organizations are just starting to realize how important it is to devote serious, permanent resources to diversity."

Corporate downsizing has forced some companies to take another look at diversity. It would seem that under the business tradition of "last hired, first fired," companies would show women and minorities the door first during a layoff.

Louis P. DiLorenzo, an employment lawyer with Bond, Schoeneck & King in Syracuse, warns companies to avoid using seniority when choosing workers for a layoff.

"If you're having a cutback, it means the organization is having some difficulties," he said. "It's most important at a time of difficulties to have the best possible work force you can envision. Using seniority doesn't give you that, in almost every setting."

Strict seniority usually destroys a company's diversity efforts, DiLorenzo said.

"They don't want to cut back on the program, and they don't want to do away with the efforts they've made because they've invested a ton of money in it," he said.

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